IDEAS AT *Work*

COMPUTERS / HILLEL SEGAL

HP LaserJet program not worth your time

If you or your company uses the popular Hewlett-Packard LaserJet printer — it's typically hooked up to an IBM PC, or PC-compatible computer — you'll probably sit up and take notice if you see the advertisements for a new program called Ram-Resident PrintMerge.

The ad invites you to "Unleash the power of your LaserJet" and claims to be a perfect companion for the laser printer. But after trying it out, I'd like to rewrite the ad to read "Unleash your powers of frustration!"

Actually, some of the things the program does are quite impressive. And, especially if

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you've been waiting for a product to come along with some of the features I'll describe, you may want to purchase the program, regardless of the frustration. As long as you know ahead about the difficult parts, the end result may still justify the investment.

According to the ad, Ram-Resident PrintMerge, from Polaris Software, San Marcos, Calif., for $149, adds the following features to the print function of your ordinary word-processing program:

✔ Merge text and graphics from different programs onto one page of a printed document.

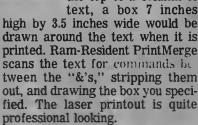✔ Draw lines, draw boxes, fill in shaded areas.

✔ Mix any combination of fonts on the same page.

The key attractive feature of the program is that you don't have to learn a new word-processing program to take advantage of these functions. It works with the three most popular word-processing programs for the IBM PC — Word Perfect, Multimate and Microsoft Word. And it can merge graphs from popular spread-sheet and data-base programs such as Lotus 1-2-3, R:base 5000 and others.

As the name Ram-Resident PrintMerge implies, the program operates by allowing both your application program, such as Word Perfect, and this program to reside in the computer's memory at the same time, and it then "merges" the extra features with the output of the application program when the "print" command is given.

For example, let's say you want to draw a box around a column of type. I do this every month on the front page of my newsletter. Having the box drawn automatically by the computer would save me about 10 minutes a month of fiddling with "press-on type" and light tables.

I found that by typing "&BX 7.0,3.5&" at the top of a column of text, a box 7 inches high by 3.5 inches wide would be drawn around the text when it is printed. Ram-Resident PrintMerge scans the text for commands between the "&'s," stripping them out, and drawing the box you specified. The laser printout is quite professional looking.

You can give many other commands to insert graphs or charts into your document, or to use other type fonts.

On the negative side, I found the program to be exceptionally difficult to learn and use. The program's documentation was written by programmers for programmers. Although I'm a fairly experienced user, I found myself reading and rereading the instructions.

After thinking that I understood it perfectly, it still took me about an hour and a dozen trial and error tests before I was able to draw the box for my newsletter in precisely the proper position. Then it messed up the second column of text, even though the box was only on the first column. Finally, I gave up and drew the box with press-on type.

On the other hand, if you have a form that is printed every day with the laser printer, or another specific task in mind, or if you have a technician who can set it up properly, it may be worth the extra cost and effort to set it up.

Hillel Segal is an independent computer consultant who specializes in helping businesses select and use personal computer software and hardware. He can be reached at the Personal Computer Managers Association, P.O. Box 9003, Boulder 80301.